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CHERYL FINLEY ON "SOUL OF A NATION: ART IN THE AGE OF BLACK POWER"



Romare Bearden,
Pittsburgh Memory, 1964,
paper collage and graphite
on board, 8 1/2 x 11 3/4".

"WHAT DID IT MEAN to be a Black artist in the USA during the Civil Rights movement and at the birth of Black Power?" In its ambitious exploration of that question, "Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power" at the Tate Modern, London, brought together more than 150 works produced between 1963 and 1983—an intense, transformative period in American art, activism, and culture, when black identity came into sharper focus and demanded to be reckoned with, while the spark of black liberation caught fire in the US, the Caribbean, and Africa. The vast majority of the sixty-some artists included had never been shown in the UK before. This important exhibition also featured a handful of works that had not seen the light of day anywhere in decades. Presenting something of a temporal-geographical mash-up, the curators (Mark Godfrey and Zoe Whitley, with Priyesh Mistry) installed the show across twelve rooms in the cavernous Bankside venue. There were galleries devoted to individual artists or collectives (Betye Saar, AfriCOBRA) and to modes, themes, or media, some keyed to a place (East Coast abstraction, Los Angeles assemblage), and others untethered to any specific locale. The rather freewheeling organizational schema encouraged visitors to draw connections among works, yet it may have made it difficult for them to forge a cohesive understanding of what was at stake for black artists during this period. Partially offsetting this problem, archival photographs, video, posters, and ephemera, as well as extensive wall labels, provided vital context.

The show opened with a gallery dedicated to Spiral, the New York collective founded in 1963 by Charles Alston, Romare Bearden, Norman Lewis, Hale Woodruff, and other artists who had been galvanized by that year's March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. This section illustrated artists' interests in politics and activism, as well as in aesthetic responses to the events of the times, which they interpreted via often-revolutionary practices and ideas. It also dramatized the debate among black artists about the merits of figuration versus those of abstraction for representing the civil rights struggle. One challenge the Spiral artists put to one another involved mounting an exhibition of works whose palette was restricted to black-and-white. A selection of pieces from this 1965 show was on view at Tate Modern: a group of Bearden's well-known magazine collages; Reginald Gammon's stark, commanding canvas *Freedom Now*, 1963, portraying steadfast civil rights marchers with their graphically powerful placards; Lewis's *Processional*, 1965, in which throngs of figures converge in an homage to the Selma-to-Montgomery marches aimed at registering black voters.

Spiral's black-and-white show (the group's only exhibition) was held in a rented space in downtown New York rather than in a commercial or institutional venue. Other collectives represented in "Soul of a Nation," founded a bit later than Spiral, sought to move beyond the gallery altogether. In Chicago, the Organization of Black American Culture (OBAC), a group of artists, educators, poets, and musicians, spearheaded the nationwide community mural movement with *The Wall of Respect*, 1967, a collaborative work honoring leading figures in black American history. A section of the wall was on view in the "Art on the Streets" gallery, which explored the questions of how black art should be exhibited and to what audiences. *The Wall of Respect* brought life to its neighborhood not simply as an artwork to be experienced on its own terms, but also in its activation as a backdrop for performances and poetry readings. Black artists took their work to the streets by other means, too, establishing their own exhibition spaces and periodicals and distributing the latter in their own communities. The agitprop stylings of Emory Douglas, the graphic artist behind the *Black Panther*, the magazine of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, founded in Oakland in 1966, boldly

communicated the organization's platform to its constituents.

Chicago also gave birth to AfriCOBRA (African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists), whose gallery in "Soul of a Nation" seemed to pulsate with vibrant hope for the future. AfriCOBRA included some of the members of OBAC, notably painter and educator Jeff Donaldson, who drafted the group's 1970 manifesto. As stated in that document, which when read aloud takes on the punctuated cadence of the era's spoken-word poets (think Last Poets, Amiri Baraka, and Gwendolyn Brooks), AfriCOBRA artists delighted in the use of "Color color color that shines, color that is free of rules and regulations . . . Superreal color for Superreal images . . . Color as bright and as real as the color dealing on the streets of Watts and the Southside and 4th street and in Roxbury and in Harlem, in Abidjan, in Port-au-Prince, Bahia and Ibadan, in Dakar and Johannesburg." They inserted text into their psychedelic compositions to drive home their meaning—for instance, Wadsworth Jarrell's bright pink, orange, and purple portrait of scholar-activist Angela Davis, *Revolutionary*, 1972, embeds the words REVOLUTIONARY and RESIST in the contours of Davis's form.

A gallery called "Figuring Black Power" delved more deeply into artists' varied strategies for activating the political and aesthetic possibilities of representation. Here visitors confronted an enormous clenched fist (*Black Unity*, 1968), carved in wood by sculptor and graphic artist Elizabeth Catlett. Its defiance was all the more striking in juxtaposition with Faith Ringgold's nearby painting *American People Series #20: Die*, 1967, a *Guernica*-style rendering of the bloody riots of the summer of '67. And Ringgold's depiction of police brutality, in turn, amplified the irony of David Hammons's use of an American flag as the support of his body print *Injustice Case*, 1970. The bound and gagged figure, framed by a stars-and-stripes border, is an evocation of Black Panther Party cofounder Bobby Seale, who was similarly restrained in the courtroom during the 1969 trial of the Chicago Seven, who were accused of conspiring to incite violence at the 1968 Democratic Convention.

Hammons's sardonic and uncompromising critiques found their equal in the works of Betye Saar. Making inventive use of cunning pieces from her vast collection of "black memorabilia," Saar imbues her assemblages with biting, occasionally shocking wit—for instance, in *I've Got Rhythm*, 1972, a newspaper clipping about a black man who was "lynched after refusing to dance on white's command" finds its visual counterpart in a charred black figure hanging from the needle of a metronome adorned with a miniature American flag. This work appeared not in the gallery dedicated to Saar but in the room devoted to Los Angeles assemblage, where it resonated with other evocations of America's historical penchant for racial violence. Melvin Edwards's brutal "Lynch Fragments," 1963—welded, wall-mounted amalgams of heavy machine parts, manacles, and hooks—suggest racial terror and mutilated black bodies. Noah Purifoy's *Totem*, 1966–68, appears armored against attack, while his *Untitled*, 1966, conjures debris collected from the 1965 Watts Rebellion and pays homage to the lives lost in the shadow of Simon Rodia's visionary Watts Towers. Dana C. Chandler Jr. re-created the bullet-riddled apartment door of Black Panther Party deputy chairman Fred Hampton, who was gunned down by Chicago police at the age of twenty-one while sleeping in his bed. Affixing a sticker—US APPROVED—to the green door, Chandler underscored themes of unbridled police brutality and conspiracy that remain all too familiar.

Just as critically pointed, in a very different way, are the paintings of Barkley L. Hendricks, one of the stars of the show. His 1969 self-portrait *Icon for My Man Superman (Superman Never Saved Any Black People —Bobby Seale)* shows the artist wearing a Superman T-shirt yet nude from the waist down, on a canvas silvered with aluminum leaf. The red, white, and blue border and the work's subtitle, a statement made by Seale at his 1969 trial, champion the messaging of the Black Panthers. This painting anchored the "Black Heroes" gallery, which also featured Andy Warhol's *Muhammad Ali*, 1978, and Raymond Saunders's *Jack Johnson*, 1971. No less than the famed Ali and Johnson, Hendricks's artist-cum-superhero seems to ask: Who says we can't make our own heroes?

The exhibition's last room charted the history of Linda Goode Bryant's Just Above Midtown gallery. Opening its doors in the heart of New York's gallery district in 1974, Just Above Midtown followed in the footsteps of other spaces founded to showcase black artists: In LA, for instance, there was the Brockman Gallery, established by brothers Dale and Alonzo Davis; and in New York, there was the Studio Museum in Harlem and Cinque Gallery. Bryant's ever-savvy exhibition/performance program garnered decisive media attention for artists including Dawoud Bey and Lorraine O'Grady. With a business degree from Columbia and curatorial experience at the Studio Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bryant was determined to cultivate a space that enabled black artists to have commercially viable careers: She implemented marketing strategies that sought to make up for years of discriminatory pricing practices, while educating would-be collectors (she regularly courted black professionals, celebrities, and entertainers) as well as museum curators and directors. Reminding us that black artists and art professionals responded to the institutional racism of the art world with a range of such forward-thinking initiatives (who says we can't make our own institutions?), this room was a fitting end to "Soul of a Nation."



Darryl Cowherd, *Portrait of Amiri Baraka*, 1967, gelatin silver print on paper mounted on board, approx. 26 x 26". From the Organization of Black American Culture's Wall of Respect, 1967.

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BLACK CULTURE and black music sell. The same is true of black struggle and black art. The market for black artists has expanded enormously in the past decade, with works by Hendricks, Lewis, and Jean-Michel Basquiat, among others, skyrocketing in value. The growing interest in these artists is reflected not just in auction prices but also in ticket sales. “Soul of a Nation” was one of the biggest draws Tate Modern has seen in recent years. The immersive online and on-site programming demonstrates how the show’s theme (read: “brand”) has been exploited, via everything from “curated” playlists to popular “Tate Late” DJ parties sponsored by Uniqlo.

“Soul of a Nation” builds on the legacy of a number of important but less hyped antecedents. In the US, one might cite Kellie Jones’s influential exhibitions (“Energy/Experimentation: Black Artists and Abstraction, 1964–1980,” at the Studio Museum in 2006; “Now Dig This: Art and Black Los Angeles 1960–1980” at the Hammer Museum in LA in 2011–12; “Witness: Art and Civil Rights in the Sixties” at the Brooklyn Museum in 2014), among other worthy shows, including Catherine Morris and Rujeko Hockley’s “We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965–85” at the Brooklyn Museum this past summer. A key predecessor on the Tate’s home turf was “Back to Black: Art, Cinema and the Racial Imaginary,” at London’s Whitechapel Gallery in 2005. Curated by Petrine Archer-Straw, David A. Bailey, and Richard J. Powell, “Back to Black” brought together some forty artists in its survey of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and ’70s, tracing the development of a radical black aesthetic not only in the US but also in the UK and the Caribbean.

This raises the question: Why stage a show like “Soul of a Nation” in London with little to no reference to the history of black art and artists’ struggles in the UK? With the possible exception of Frank Bowling’s extraordinary canvas *Middle Passage*, 1970, the curators seemed to avoid acknowledging the influences and affinities between African American and black British artists. Just this past spring, in the critically acclaimed exhibition “The Place Is Here,” Nottingham Contemporary presented a retrospective of the UK Black Arts Movement of the 1980s, celebrating such pioneering artists as Sonia Boyce and Keith Piper and groups like the Black Audio Film Collective. “The Place Is Here” traveled to the South London Gallery in mid-June and ran roughly concurrently with the Tate retrospective. But the shows were effectively segregated from each other. There was a missed opportunity to create a platform for conversation between black artists in the US and the UK. Such a dialogue might have productively investigated the interrelated civil rights movements that impacted and revolutionized artmaking practices, alliances, and pedagogy, while tapping into the urgency that many artists feel today when faced with the racism, xenophobia, and nationalism flourishing globally.

But if the cosmopolitanism of the art in “Soul of a Nation” was left largely tacit, and if its place in postcolonial cultural networks remained undefined, the liberatory and radical potential of these works, by no means limited to an American context, was palpable nonetheless. Beyond Tate Modern, there are other signs that this potential is being unlocked—for example, the current Turner Prize exhibition at Ferens Art Gallery in Hull, which opened while “Soul of a Nation” was still on view. This year, the long-standing rule of nominating only artists fifty and under has been relaxed to permit the inclusion of older, overlooked candidates—an important recognition of the lasting effects discrimination may have on the speedy unfolding of an art career. Among the four nominees are two black artists of note, Hurvin Anderson and Lubaina Himid, signaling a changing tide for black art in the UK and, perhaps, beyond.

“Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power” travels to Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, AR, February 3–April 23, 2018; Brooklyn Museum, New York, September 7, 2018–February 3, 2019.

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Visit our archive to read Huey Copeland on Barkley L. Hendricks (April 2009), Kellie Jones and Robert Farris Thompson in conversation (February 2013), and Mark Godfrey on Melvin Edwards and Frank Bowling (May 2015).

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